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SUBJECT: FORMER FM YOO ON NORTH KOREA

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: Former FM Yoo Chong-ha told poloffs September 18 that President Lee Myung-bak had not yet come up with a formula for conducting successful foreign policy. Yoo said he was personally committed to helping Lee get it right since he felt, as one of the co-chairs of the election committee, partly responsible for Lee's election. In a lengthy discussion that ranged from the French journalist's book *Sortie de Communisme* to conditions in Sudan, the dapper septuagenarian regaled poloffs with lessons learned from his career, and, drawing on his experience, made three main observations about President Lee. First, he noted that Lee's announcement on July 11 that he would attempt further dialog with North Korea just hours after a South Korean tourist had been shot and killed at the North Korean Mt. Kumgang resort was a colossal failure; second, he explained why he thought China would not attempt to turn North Korea into a satellite country if the current leadership collapsed; and finally he commented on the prospects for the infusion of legislators into the Cabinet in a major cabinet reshuffling likely at the end of 2008. End Summary.

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Bad Idea  
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12. (C) Former Foreign Minister (1996-8) Yoo Chong-ha explained over lunch that President Lee Myung-bak had made a huge mistake by announcing at a speech July 11 that opened the National Assembly that the ROKG would attempt to open further dialog with North Korea. First, any such announcement should be pre-arranged with North Korea so at least the reclusive regime did not refute the overture as was the case this August. Second, on the heels of the tragic shooting death of a tourist, this statement was rejected by the vast majority of South Koreans and furthered the image many detractors have that Lee is out of touch. To boot, the surprise gesture made the North Koreans lose face, Yoo said.

13. (C) Yoo said President Lee asked him what he should have done instead and Yoo replied Lee should not have made such a statement. Lee gave a lengthy (3-4 minute) explanation why he had but Yoo said he was not convinced and told Lee he had no justification for such a gaffe. Yoo said he admonished Lee for making such a poor decision and could not understand why Lee made such a move. He speculated that Lee never received a full briefing on the shooting at Mt. Kumgang. As Yoo told us, Lee was responsible for foreign policy and could not make such mistakes. He attributed the proposal to

Minister of Unification Kim Ha-joong and noted he would almost certainly go in a cabinet shuffle expected by many at the end of 2008.

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Will KJI's Heart Go On and On?  
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¶4. (C) Yoo said that the consensus of North Korea watchers was that North Korea would not last more than 20 years. Therefore, it could collapse during Lee Myung-bak's term and Yu said he recently told Lee he must be prepared for such an eventuality. Yu said that Lee told him he had not thought about this much and agreed that Lee's preparations to deal with North Korea's eventual demise could be his legacy. The most important way to prepare would be to work very closely with China and the U.S. so that all three parties were ready when the time came to work together.

¶5. (C) Yoo added that Kim Jong-il drank so much when he was younger that it was surprising he had lasted as long as he had. According to first-hand reports, nightowl Kim, in his younger years, would start drinking alcohol at 4pm and would drink until 4am daily, Yoo claimed.

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China's Support Not Likely to Go On and On  
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¶6. (C) Yoo, who attended the Beijing Olympic closing ceremony as a VIP guest of the Chinese Government, said that several highly-ranked Chinese diplomats had told him that China did not want to develop North Korea as a satellite because of two reasons: first, the PRC knew that eventually North Korea would be absorbed by South Korea, and second that Koreans were the ethnic group that was hardest to assimilate in China so there was no interest in bringing more into China. Yoo said the Chinese had learned an important lesson from Russia's experience with Afghanistan. Yoo said 150,000 PRC troops were stationed on the North Korea border, signaling an end to the "friendship" that existed when Kim Il-Sung was alive and the PRC agreed to only post security guards. Yoo speculated the PRC army was there to prevent any mass exodus of North Koreans. Yoo did say that, in the event of a collapse, the Chinese Government would probably extend some consideration to the North Korean military because of "a close affinity."

¶7. (C) Yoo cautioned against thinking that the North Korea regime would slowly fade away. Invoking a metaphor from the French book "Sortie de Communisme," Yoo said that authoritarian regimes tended to break the same way a tombstone does. They seem very solid even in the strongest wind, until one day they just crack and fall over. That, Yoo predicted, would be North Korea's fate.

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Reshuffle - Possible Power for Park?  
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¶8. (C) Park Jin recently won an election among GNP legislators that awarded him the chairmanship of the prestigious Foreign Affairs, Trade and Unification (FATU) committee over fourth term lawmaker Nam Kyung-pil. Yoo explained that Park could have waited two years and let Nam be Chair first but that Park was "aggressive" and did not want to wait. He vociferously stated that Nam was "no competition" for Park and that, while Park's power play was not popular with many, he had won. In politics, winning was what mattered most. Lee Myung-bak did not particularly like Park, Yoo said, because of Park's wishy-washy support for Lee last year during the campaign, but still Park would be one of the first to become minister if there were a GNP-initiated cabinet shuffle in late 2008 as most considered Park qualified to be the next foreign minister. Since the GNP helped Lee get elected and legislators had stayed out of the first cabinet to run for election in the April elections, the GNP could request 3-5 ministerial posts in a potential

reshuffle.

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Free, But Bogey-Free?  
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19. (C) Yoo claimed that he turned down several positions that Lee offered him because, at 72, he did not want to be held down by the ethical rules applicable to public officials. These included not being able to play golf on weekdays or take weekend trips to Japan or China for golf. Since he requests no personal favors when he sees President Lee, he said he has access to see Lee occasionally and had earned his title as the bluntest of Lee's advisors.  
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